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Civil Society and Party Politics in Bulgaria after 2013: A Gramscian Look

Abstract

In 2013 Bulgaria was shaken by two waves of mass protests, which seemed to mobilise distinct social groups and put different, and often conflicting, demands on the table. In the midst of the turbulence of the protests, new political formations emerged, which aimed to capitalize on the mobilizations. The mushrooming of new political projects in the wake of the mass protests seems to mark an apparent re-politicization following the post-political turn after 1989. Yet the language and identities of these new civic and party formations point to a more complicated dynamic between civic movements, political parties, and the state. Drawing on Gramsci's theory of hegemony, this paper scrutinizes the links between the newly emerged political projects and the civic mobilizations of 2013 to unravel the new social cleavages underpinning them and consider how these are played out in a context of a changed relationship between civil society and party politics twenty-five years after the fall of the socialist regime in Bulgaria.

Keywords: civil society, political parties, hegemonic struggles, Antonio Gramsci, Bulgaria

Bulgaria saw two waves of mass protests in 2013 – one in February-March and one which started in June and lasted a yearⁱ. The two waves appeared different – mobilising distinct social groups and making divergent, and often conflicting, demands of power-holders. What is more, at the same time as both contending a wide circle of elites, the two protest waves seemed to engage in a contentious struggle *between* each other. During and in the aftermath of the protests, several new political formations emerged, all of which attempted to capitalize on the protest mobilizations. These new political actors are particularly interesting as they aimed to specifically address some protesting groups' grievances, and distance themselves from others. Some looked to represent the voice of the discontented crowds of the Winter mobilization; others presented themselves as the political formations expressing specifically the grievances and demands of the Summer anti-governmental protesters. This apparent mushrooming of new political projects seemed to signal the dissolution of the post-socialist transition's liberal consensus, beckoning an apparent re-politicization. Yet the language and identities of these new civic and party formations flag a more complicated dynamic between civic movements, political parties, and the state, reflecting changed social divisions twenty-five years after the collapse of the socialist regime. The 1990s' anti-totalitarian slogan 'civil society against the state' has clearly given way to a different kind of struggle in the context of a liberal democratic institutional arrangement.

This paperⁱⁱ aims to examine the intersection between the contentious mobilizations of February and Summer 2013, and the newly-formed political parties. Reflecting the contentious nature of the struggles on both the terrains of civil society and party politics, as well as reflecting the very language protesters and political parties used – central to which was the discourse of 'civil society' – the analysis will utilize

ⁱ For purposes of brevity, I will refer to the former as the Winter or February protest, and to the latter as the Summer protest.

ⁱⁱ The findings presented in this paper draw on a PhD research project which applied Critical Discourse Analysis to Bulgaria's protests of 2013.

the explanatory potential of Gramsci's theory of hegemony. The latter has tremendous potential to capture precisely the dynamic interaction both *within* civil society (potentially apprehending the contentious intra-relationships within it), and *between* civil society and formal politics (since the idea of hegemony was conceived as "a technique of political rule" [Riley 2011: 3] by consent, established through the structures of civil society). Below I first offer a brief account of Gramsci's theory of hegemony as used in this paper; I then conduct a succinct analysis of the two protest waves of 2013 and an overview of the four main political projects which emerged either in the course of, or in the aftermath of the mobilizationsⁱ. I then offer a Gramscian interpretation of the intersection between the two.

Civil society and the state: Gramsci's theory of hegemony

For Gramsci, hegemony is a form of moral and intellectual leadership, whereby the wider population understands their own interests as being fundamentally compatible with the hegemonic social group (see e.g. Buttgieg 1995), which grants them the legitimacy to hold state power. But it is only once a certain way of thinking and seeing the world has acquired hegemonic character in *civil society*, that a political project built on it can become hegemonic, that is become a political project that claims social, cultural and economic leadership (see also Thomas 2013: 26-7). The success of a social group in acquiring and maintaining stable control over the modern state then depends on its influence over civil society. Gramsci's civil society can thus be defined as a terrain of social (class) struggle between different groups vying for state power.

During periods of stable, or 'normal' politics, state power is not open to contestation, but only government is (Riley 2011): political struggles unfold on a "legal terrain" (Gramsci 1971: 256) – through elections and in parliament, whilst maintaining bureaucratic continuity. Unlike in times of normal politics, during periods of 'organic crises' political movements with competing visions of the state clash, effectively challenging the core of state power, i.e. the bureaucratic "caste" (Gramsci 1971: 246). The variable at the heart of this distinction between 'normal' and 'revolutionary' politics (Adamson 1980: 627-8) is the relative strength of the dominant class' hegemony. To describe the struggles during such organic crises, Gramsci uses the military terms 'war of manoeuvre' and 'war of position'. The first he defines as a frontal attack on state power, and the second – as comprising political processes *in preparation* for the war of manoeuvre, which amount to a sort of cultural/intellectual struggle where one class pursues hegemony by establishing its own 'common sense' over other contenders for hegemony.

A Gramscian lens on the political dynamics in 2013 in Bulgaria can help us see the protest mobilizations of 2013 not only as a struggle against power-holders (since grievances were directed at the political and economic elites, who are perceived as opportunistic and corrupt), but also as hegemonic struggles between different social groups *on* the arena of civil society, *for* the reconstitution of civil society, i.e. as part of a Gramscian *positional warfare*. I argue that at the root of the peculiar divisions and contention between different protesting groups which transpired in 2013 was the struggle to occupy strategic

ⁱ Methodologically, I focus on the discourses of both the protest movements and the new political formations; and I follow the Critical Discourse Analysis approach developed by Norman Fairclough (1992) (who himself draws heavily on Gramsci's theory of hegemony). As a theory and method, the CDA focuses on the relations between discursive and extra-discursive elements which serve to advance the interests of particular social groups (at the expense of others). The overarching critical question which guides my discourse analysis is how contexts of political action, values and goals are represented in and shape political agents' language and practices as part of broad socio-political struggles. My objective is to identify, through discourse analysis, the particular semiotic and extra-semiotic features of the social cleavages which transpired in 2013, and their implications for politics in the country twenty-plus years after the regime change.

strongholds within civil society which would grant the victorious social group the legitimacy to launch a ‘war of manoeuvre’ for state power. The emergence of new political parties described later in this paper then can be seen as opportunistic attempts to prepare the ground for *manoeuvring warfare* by capitalising on the positioning class struggles within civil societyⁱ.

A critical role in these processes was played by intellectuals. The significance of this group here is twofold: theoretically, Gramsci put them at the heart of political (class) struggles at the intersection between civil society and politics proper; empirically, they have played a decades-long key role in politics in Bulgaria (and Central and Eastern Europe generally) (see Hristova 2007, 2011; Bozoki 1999; Eyal, Szeleny and Townsley 2000). For Gramsci, it is the intellectuals’ function to help provide legitimacy for the hegemonic project of the day, and thus for the dominant social group advancing it. Intellectuals achieve this by organising the practical content of hegemony and manufacturing consent for it, in this way forging the dominant classes’ interests into what Gramsci called the ‘common sense’. As we shall see, the socio-symbolic power of intellectuals to formulate moral ends, to define the terms of the distribution of status and prestige, and to (de)legitimise political action, transpired as particularly potent in Bulgaria during both the Winter and the Summer protests of 2013.

Protest mobilizations of 2013

The protests of 2013 were probably the most wide-spread protest mobilizations in Bulgaria since 1990. The first wave in February started over abnormally high electricity bills. Protesters rallied behind slogans calling for the nationalisation of the foreign-owned energy companies, whom they blamed for the price hike, as well as behind slogans for an ‘end’ to poverty, unemployment, and low pay. The mobilization also called for the abolition of political representation and political parties, whom they blamed for ‘betraying’ the interests of the people, and demanded radical changes to the political system in favour of a more direct form of democracy. Many declared that they no longer believed in political parties and desired to ‘take power into their own hands’. Slogans along these lines included: ‘*No To Parties and [No] To Monopolies*’, ‘*Down Go The Mafia. Power In Citizens’ [hands]*’ and ‘*End to the Illusions. Self-governance. Activeness Every Day*’. Protesters also organised horizontally structured ‘citizen councils’ and initiated grassroots drafting of a new constitution which would reflect their demands for political system changes. The protest’s language was revolutionary, emotionally charged and often conspiracy obsessed; grievances were also often articulated in nationalistic terms. In general, we can think of this protest as a radical democratic intervention by *subaltern* groups, who rejected political mediation (parties) and articulated a notion of civil society that overlaps with the notion of ‘the people’: a ‘*people’s civil society*’ (see Tsoneva and Medarov, 2014).

Interestingly, what many of the revolutionary manifestos which flooded the Bulgarian public sphere in February seemed to share was the demand to replace politicians (or political representatives) with *citizens*. Many of the placards which were raised in the streets also echoed this, for example: ‘*It is the citizens’, not the parties’ protest*’. Some of the most commonly reiterated phrases on the protest were ‘(anti)-corruption’, ‘(anti)-monopolies’, ‘civil society’, ‘transparency’ and ‘responsibility’. These are of course key liberal signifiers; yet they spearheaded demands for nationalisation of energy companies and abolition of representative democracy. Central liberal notions then textured a populist (in the sense of anti-elitist) discourse: one which dichotomises the social order into *them* (politicians/mafia/power-holders) versus *us* (‘the people’), but which at the same time articulates a conspicuously liberal – responsible, active, alert (who keeps political power in check) – civic subjectivity. In other words, articulating themselves as ‘citizens’ along with ‘the people’, and calling for ‘activeness’ and ‘responsibility’ every day, protesters attempted to re-stake a claim on the concept of ‘civil society’.

ⁱ However, this paper will mostly focus on the positioning warfare observed in 2013 (that is, on the relationship between the protest mobilizations and the new political parties).

taking it away from its post-1989 carriers – mostly NGO ‘experts’ (Tsoneva and Medarov, 2014), and ‘back’ into people’s hands, where it belongs.

Thus, the February protest’s combination of conspiracy narratives, revolutionary rhetoric, and ‘citizen-patriot’ identities, produced an internally-contradicting and fragmented, often radically inclusionary (when they demanded direct democracy) but sometimes exclusionary (when they spoke in nationalistic terms) articulation of a new political subjectivity which attempted a counter-hegemonic intervention twenty-three years after ‘the end of history’. This new subaltern subject challenged the transition’s liberal consensus which had been attempted by an alliance of the political and intellectual elites of the ‘transition’. Both the consensus’ *economic* pillars, i.e. liberalization, privatization, and deregulation, and its *political* pillar, i.e. representative democracy, got contested as part of a *collective* bottom-up political intervention for the first time.

The ‘populist’ protest of the subalterns of Winter 2013 then seemed to threaten to shake the dominant identity discourse of the transition – one that was linked to a capitalist narrative of future progress. Many of the intellectualsⁱ who spent the last two decades procuring public consent for the liberal-capitalist consensus saw the protest as too irrational (anti-capitalist), too nationalist and too conspiracy-obsessed, as well as well as dangerously “backward looking” (including nostalgic of the socialist period). They dismissed it as a protest that “sought social privileges rather than rights” (Genov 2013) and thus as ‘populist’, ‘nostalgic of communism’ and ‘irrational’. They saw the February demands as ranging from the “unwise” and “absurd” to “the catastrophically harmful” and “fantasmagoric” (Stanchev 2013; Bakalov 2013). To these intellectuals, it seemed to pose a threat to the modernization (Europeanization) and de-communization projects which underpinned the agenda of the ‘transition’ (and which seemed to boast much greater consolidating power during the 1990s).

The February protests resulted in the resignation of the centre-right government (GERB). Interim elections held in May produced an opposition-led coalition government composed of the Bulgarian Socialist Partyⁱⁱ (BSP) – successors of the Bulgarian Communist Party (in government 1944–1990) – and the liberal Movement for Rights and Freedom (MRF) – informally known as the party representing Bulgaria’s Turkish minority. Just a month into its mandate, the new government made a very infamous decision to propose Delyan Peevski, a controversial figure widely suspected of corruption on an extraordinary scale, for the position of chief of the State Agency for National Security (DANS). This triggered a wide reaction of moral indignation and, once again, people took to the streets. Tens of thousands marched daily to protest the controversial appointment, and to challenge what many perceived as ‘coalescence between politicians and mafia’ in the country. Although the government was quick to repeal the infamous appointment within days, the protests persisted (though predominantly in the capital Sofia) demanding the immediate resignation of the new government which had now lost its credence in the eyes of many.

The Summer protest’s central demand – for resignation – was accompanied by calls for ‘morality in politics’, ‘authentic experts’ and ‘European normalcy’. It displayed clear pro-EU attitudes and imagined itself as “belonging to authentic civil society”ⁱⁱⁱ. It was also consistently anti-communist (directed at the BSP), since the ‘failures of the transition’ were attributed to ‘communist remainders’ in post-1989

ⁱ These can be thought of as the ‘organic intellectuals’ (Gramsci) of the liberal-capitalist vision for the post-1989 transformation

ⁱⁱ BSP tends to be socialist only in name and partly rhetoric, since in their policies (and often in rhetoric) they have consistently followed the line of the liberal-capitalist consensus.

ⁱⁱⁱ At the same time, some of its language was conspicuously illiberal, comprising anti-Turkish chants (since Peevski is a member of the Turkish-minority MRF party), which contradicted their self-proclaimed liberal sentiments (see also Dawson 2014).

politicsⁱ. The protest also insisted on staying peaceful and ‘positive’, and generated an extraordinary amount of original and creative imagery. Many of the intellectuals of the ‘transition’, who were overtly critical of the Winter protests, now saw in the Summer protest liberal and pro-Western (EU) leanings and began to use the liberal media to emphasise what they saw as the latter’s ‘high culture’, eventually framing it as the protest of the moral, productive and creative, tax- (and bills-) paying, and even “beautiful” *middle-class*, which they pinned as the authentic carrier of the long coveted ‘civil society’ which would finally purge the ‘communist’ remainders and finish the ‘incomplete transition’ to European ‘normalcy’. The frame was quickly picked up by many of the protesters themselves. In forging this identity, some intellectuals, activists, and media outlets conceitedly declared that this protest is different from the Winter one, claiming that it was the poor and desperate ‘mobs’ who protested in February, while now the ‘middle classes’ were marching not for material trivialities (such as bills), but for ‘values’ against the corrupt political elitesⁱⁱ. What is more, they claimed that if the former were nostalgic of communism and prone to populism, the latter were rational enough to know that free market capitalism (and austerity politics) is the way forward. Despite the daily protests, the government stayed in power for a year and finally resigned in July 2014, putting an end to this second wave of street protests. New interim elections were then held in October 2014 which produced a government coalition between GERB, the Reform Block (the new formation mentioned earlier), the nationalist ‘Patriotic Front’, and the centre-left ABVⁱⁱⁱ.

The elitist discourse of the Summer protest then can be seen as an attempt to re-assert the hegemonic position of the transition’s liberal consensus which had been wearing away during the 2000s, and which had been severely attacked by the February protest. Steered by the liberal intellectuals of the transition, discourses pertaining to both the consensus’ negative and positive definitions, i.e. anti-communism and neoliberalism respectively, were abundant in the language of the Summer protest, and appeared to attempt to gain whatever ground had been lost to what they saw as the “populists” and “communists” of February. Thus, the conflicting visions espoused in February and Summer 2013, which involved a host of contentions such as whether nationalising or liberalising the energy market constituted ‘good sense’ and whether direct or representative democracy is a better form of governance, clashed in a bid for hegemony over the ‘common sense’ of the whole of society (i.e. in a bid for hegemony). The ‘apple of contention’ which forged the specific divisions among protesters in 2013 was the right to represent civil society which would ultimately grant one the right to impose a particular vision for social change, since a hegemonic position within civil society entails one’s vision for social transformation acquiring hegemonic character.

These struggles, however, pushed political actors to attempt to adapt to the increasingly contentious ideological environment, as well as to the non-partisan identifications of protesters: both waves claimed theirs was citizens’/civil society’s protests and did not let party symbols or flags to crop up on the demonstrations. The disenchantment with traditional political party identifications is of course not a new phenomenon – augmented by the post-Cold War liberal-capitalist consensus, the traditional left-right divisions in Eastern Europe have been dissipating since the early 2000s when we witnessed the emergence of what Hanley and Sikk (2014) called anti-establishment parties. For many of these, as well as for any new-comers, however, it now seems necessary to appear as ‘representing civil society’. Below

ⁱ The government coalition was usually referred to as ‘communists’ and people frequently shouted ‘*red scum*’ on protest demonstrations.

ⁱⁱ For example, Asen Genov, one of the most famous activist-protester wrote:

February was the poor’s protest, whereas now it is the protest of people who have promising futures, who lead independent lives. The February protest was for privileges, now it is for rights. Back then they wanted lower electricity prices, or in general terms – they wanted privileges, whereas now they want fundamental values [...] (Genov 2013)

ⁱⁱⁱ ‘Alternative for Bulgarian Revival’ split off the Bulgarian Socialist Party at the beginning of 2014.

I briefly review four of the newly-emerged political parties in Bulgaria in the aftermath of the protests, all of which seemed to be attempting such a manoeuvre, i.e. staking a claim on ‘civil society’.

Post-2013 political formations: parties of the ‘people’s civil society’ and parties of the ‘middle classes’ civil society’

A month after the February protests, some of the most active protesters who appeared most often on media and were widely perceived as its leaders (despite themselves rejecting the label) broke their pledge to never enter the political arena as a party, and their movement, called ‘*Movement for Civic Control*’, participated in the interim parliamentary elections in May 2013 as part of a political party – ‘*Democratic Civic Initiative*’ⁱ. With the motto ‘*Civic Control - That is You*’, it claimed to be “the mandatary of the protest” (Fileva 2013) and to represent the “awaken civic consciousness” of the Bulgarian people. The candidate MPs selection procedure reflected their pledge and is illustrative of their popular will subjectivity: candidate-MPs were to be selected “straight from the street”; the latter were to also sign a ‘*declaration for honest political behaviour*’ⁱⁱ, a symbolic act which echoes the revolutionary, moral-nationalist and highly charged rhetoric of the February protests. The party was short-lived as it failed to secure any seats in the elections, but the movement (‘*Movement for Civic Control*’) is still active, keeping the debate about corruption in the energy sector in Bulgaria and about the problems of representative democracy animated, albeit nowhere near as intense and now mostly only on the internet.

Another new party – ‘*Bulgaria without Censorship*’ – also emerged after the February mobilizations. It was headed by a former TV-host Nikolay Barekov who began a generous campaign of promises such as to get unemployment down to 0% and to provide a tablet for every schoolchild (Mladenova 2014). He also vowed “to work for capitalism and market economy with a human face” and claimed to “desire reconciliation and unification for the Bulgarian nation” (ibid.), in this way skilfully combining liberal and nationalist elements in a bid to reproduce the hybrid subject articulations of the winter protesters (but also seemingly desiring to capture the pro-capitalist sentiments of some of the summer protesters). He further pledged that “all politicians who have broken the law will lie in prison” (ibid.), vividly echoing the chants of the February protest crowd. He also pledged to fulfil this promise by carrying out an ‘*Operation Clean Hands*’ – the label used by some of the summer protesters to refer to a demand to audit the income and property possessions of the Bulgarian political class of the transition. In this way, Barekov clearly attempted to present his political project as representing civil society in all its articulations – both the ‘people’s civil society’ of the Winter and the elitist middle-class’ civil society of the Summer. At the same time, he was allegedly financially supported by major businesses and linked to controversial figures, including Delyan Peevski (the media mogul whose appointment triggered the summer protests), which eventually dealt a blow to Barekov’s political project which is now collapsing. In the words of Vasil Garnizov (2014), a social anthropologist and protester in the Summer:

...[B]arekov’s problem is that the discontented [of the February protests] do not recognize him [as their representative], and the active [summer] protesters openly mock him as a face and a mask of the status-quo.

Another new political party which emerged from the protests of 2013 was *DEOS*, which was registered in the summer of 2014. The party describes itself as a “political subject which does not fit the standard [political] frames and terms. We lay the beginnings of a new type of politics, which banks on active civic participation and bottom-up initiative” (DEOSa n.d.). Its stated priorities are: the enforcement of

ⁱ Instead of registering an entirely new party, protesters used the legal registration of an existing marginal one – ‘*Democratic Civic Initiative*’.

ⁱⁱ “We realise that just a signature is not adequate guarantee for morale, but we will make sure that if someone screws up, it would be hard for them to go out on the street [sic]” (Fileva 2013)

law, sustainable development, and education (ibid.); its stated mission is “to work actively to make Bulgaria a well-run state [where] the rule of law is [strong], in which we all develop [ourselves] freely in the conditions of democracy, pluralism, market economy and Euro-Atlantic orientation” (DEOSb n.d.). As Tsoneva and Medarov (n.d.) note, its structure, language and practices conspicuously borrow from the project management and entrepreneurial orders of discourse (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999) of the NGO and business spheres: for example, the people behind the party insist on calling DEOS a ‘project’, rather than a party. Its ethos further disavows representation and explicit leadership and reflects a post-anarchist direct democratic principle (Tsoneva and Medarov n.d.). Its members also articulate a ‘productive and pro-active’ subjectivity, echoing the summer protesters’ subject positioning as the disgruntled productive, tax- and bills- paying middle class. DEOS are still a small and somewhat marginal political formation, but seems to be growing and gaining popularity amongst young liberal circles in Sofia.

At the height of the summer protest yet another new political formation emerged, calling itself *The Reform Bloc*, and claiming to represent ‘the authentic’ civil society of the liberal, pro-EU middle class. It was set up as a coalition of five (previously existing) parties positioned to the right of the political spectrum. Apart from the parties in the Bloc, a body called ‘citizen council’ was also set up to include ‘citizens’ unaffiliated with the party. The Bloc also built a close working relationship with formal civil society organizations, particularly those supportive of and active in the Summer protest (such as ‘Protest Network’ⁱ). The rhetoric of the Bloc did not seem to reflect any of the concerns and language of the Winter protest. In contrast, it mirrored the ‘rational’, anti-communist, pro-EU and pro-morale concerns and rhetoric of the ‘frustrated middle class’ (to use Greskovits [2007] and Krastev’s [2007] term) who marched in the Summer of 2013. A new coalition of already-established parties, the Reform Bloc can be seen as highly illustrative of the tendency for political parties to (need to) re-articulate themselves in a new Gestalt to meet the exigency of the new ideological environment. The political parties which formed the Bloc are mostly the parties to the right of the political spectrum which survived in a separate form after the dissolution of the bi-polar political model of the 1990sⁱⁱ, and specifically the political fragments left after the disintegration of the United Democratic Forces [UDF], which was one of the two main political parties of the 1990s. The formation of the Bloc was celebrated by its supporters as the ‘(re-)unification of the right-hand’. It is reasonable to argue that such a re-unification was effectively the response of the liberal-capitalist subjectivity under attack from the newly articulated popular-democratic wide coalition of political discontent (in February).

Since the early 2000s, the liberal-capitalist consensus has been challenged by parties widely perceived as populist (‘anti-establishment’) such as Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha’s movement focused on anti-corruption (in government 2001-2005), Volen Siderov’s far-right ‘Ataka’, and Boiko Borisov’s GERB (in government 2009-2013), but only in rhetoric: despite their ‘populist’ promises, all of these persistently pushed (neo-)liberal policies, or as Krastev (2007) summarises, governments changed but their policies remained the same. With the challenge this time ‘from below’ in February 2013, however, the ‘right-hand’ could no longer afford to be ‘divided’ in smaller parties – it had to reunite as a coherent political agent capable of withstanding the threat coming from what they saw as mobs seduced by communism and populism, who articulated the hybrid political subjectivity of a ‘people’s civil society’ in February. What is more, this re-unification had to be articulated in terms that would allow the protesting ‘middle class’ of the summer to recognize them as their political representative; hence the

ⁱ An organization composed of the most active protesters of the Summer.

ⁱⁱ During the 1990s the Bulgarian political system was essentially bi-polar – with the United Democratic Forces (UDF) and BSP as the main players – until 2001 when this model was destroyed with the entry of a new political party, headed by Bulgaria’s ex-czar Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha. The latter appeared as the first ‘anti-establishment’ party which claimed to overcome the old left-right divisions and to work for the eradication of corruption, effectively sustaining the liberal consensus established before its arrival.

need to articulate ‘The Reform Bloc’ as not only yet another party to represent civil society, but one that represents ‘authentic civil society’.

‘Positioning’ and ‘manoeuvring’: hegemonic struggles at the intersection between civil society and party politics

The hegemonic struggles we have observed in Bulgaria in 2013 then can be seen as reflecting changed socio-political divisions twenty-plus years after the fall of the socialist regime. The 1990s’ slogan ‘civil society against the state’ has now given way to a different kind of struggle: one that no longer pits a *homogenous* civil society *against* the state, but a struggle which seeks to re-constitutes class-based political articulations *within* civil society, which are consequently utilized in a bid to take control of state power. To understand the struggles within such a conceptual framework, would be to grasp the language and practices of both protest movements and political parties by matching their political tactics with the conditions in which they operate and the goals they pursue, i.e. apprehending the specific type of political conjuncture in which they function.

These two protest waves then need to be seen as part of the ‘organic crises’ set off in the former socialist states in 1989. Utilizing another Gramscian concept, the Bulgarian ‘revolution’ of 1989 can be seen as a ‘*passive revolution*’ in that it was externally brought about (following Gorbachev’s *perestroika*) and elite-engineered: there was at the time no attempt to drive popular support and change the world-view (the ‘common sense’) of the ‘masses’, i.e. to establish political and cultural hegemony before the toppling of the regime. Instead, it was a revolution ‘from above’, to which the great majority simply acquiesced. The decade which followed involved intense attempts to establish such political and cultural hegemony of the transition’s liberal consensus, key to which were the ‘projects’ of *de-communisation* (or purging of the ‘burden’ of the totalitarian past) and *modernization* (or catching up with the West on a course to a liberal democratic future). The (neo-)liberal ideas of privatization, liberalization and deregulation achieved a seemingly hegemonic character under the reform government of the United Democratic Forces (UDF) between 1997-2001. At the beginning of the 2000s, however, a multiplicity of competing discourses began to emerge. The previously hegemonic discourses of de-communisation, liberal democracy and free market economy became increasingly fragmented and contested by the new discourses of *populism*, *nationalism* and, most recently, *anti-austerity*. It can be argued that during the 2000s then we witnessed the decline of a hegemonic discourse (which had temporarily functioned as a social imaginary, as a “horizon” [Laclau 1990: 63]) into a discourse once again struggling for hegemony: “a mythical space which strives to survive in the political arena” (Çelik 2000: 201). This ideological fragmentation transpired gradually during the late 2000s and, augmented by the global economic crisis set off in 2007, culminated in the protest mobilizations of 2013.

In other words, following a gradual corrosion since early 2000s and a severe challenge in the face of the 2007 global economic meltdown, the post-1989 liberal-capitalist imaginary (‘horizon’) received a bottom-up attack in the form of the two protest mobilizations of 2013. In the context of such a political conjuncture, the two protest waves and the formation of new political parties claiming to represent them, point to two main inferences. The political mobilizations constituted a sort of *war of position*, whereby the struggle was waged over how a *desired* new social order – a new ‘consensus’ – would be constituted. Key to these ‘positioning’ struggles is the competition between different social groups’ divergent definitions of problems and proposals for solutions. The stake is a hegemonic status for the respective political project that would grant the social class advancing it the ability to launch a ‘war of manoeuvre’ against the state, i.e. engage in a political struggle for state power. These ‘positioning’ struggles were fought on the terrain of civil society in a bottom-up manner: both civic movements preceded the formation of the political organizations which claimed to represent them. From this follows the second inference I draw: in the context of a liberal institutional arrangement more than two decades after 1989, civil society is no longer the homogenous entity imagined shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall. With

the growing heterogeneity of post-socialist civil society, facilitated by the dissolution of the liberal consensus, the importance of political struggles on the arena of civil society has increased tremendously; that is, increasingly, struggles for hegemony in the region need to be played out first and foremost on the terrain of civil society, before they can be transferred onto the arena of formal politicsⁱ. In other words, gaining legitimacy *vis-à-vis* civil society by way of building an identity of ‘civil society representatives’ appears to have become critical for political projects striving for political leadership in the post-socialist region.

Conclusion

Overall, the turbulent events in Bulgaria in 2013 demonstrate a radically transformed political dynamic twenty-plus years after 1989. The transition’s liberal consensus saw in February 2013 the most severe challenge up to date in the country. Importantly, the challenge emerged in a bottom-up manner, as an outbreak of the insurrectionary energies of the disenchanted subaltern classes, or the oppressed and marginalised sections of society, who articulated a hybrid political subjectivity of a ‘people’s civil society’, imbricating the national-popular with the liberal. The liberal intellectuals of the ‘transition’ contemptuously dismissed them as ‘February mobs seduced by communism and populism’. To be able to withstand the threat coming from such counter-hegemonic subalterns, the same liberal intellectuals then rushed to seize upon the June wave of protests, and attempted to channel the latter’s energies in an anti-communist and pro-neoliberal direction. This top-down ‘counter-counter-hegemonic’ intervention by intellectuals captured the political and economic imagination of Sofia’s aspiring middle-class, and carved out a class-based fissure within the civil society body. Amid these hegemonic struggles on the arena of civil society, several new political projects emerged, four of which I discussed above. Two of these – *Democratic Citizen’s Initiative* and *Bulgaria Without Censorship* – attempted to capitalize mostly on the radical national-popular insurgency of February, whereas the other two – the *DEOS* project and the *Reform Bloc* – sought to represent specifically the voice of those who desired an ‘evolutionary reform’ (a completion) of the liberal transition, rather than its undoing. Significantly, the political ‘manoeuvring’ of these new political actors no longer takes place in isolation from what was long perceived as a ‘weak’ civil society in the region (Howarth 2003). Instead, political manoeuvres in the region today seem to be increasingly pressed to draw their very legitimacy from civil society, which on its part seems ruptured with unprecedented positioning struggles over what will constitute the next ‘consensus’.

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ⁱ Thus confirming one of Gramsci’s key arguments: that within the liberal capitalist states of 20th century Western Europe, a rising revolutionary class would necessarily have to *first* deal with “the trenches of civil society” established by the bourgeoisie, before it could launch a successful ‘war of manoeuvre’ against the latter’s state power.

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